

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Silver Lining in Summer 2012

Despite Tough Working Conditions, Christopher Garcia Builds Foundation for Successful Organic Farm

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The summer of 2012 wasn't a good time to start growing organic fruits and vegetables or graze livestock for Woodward farmer Christopher Garcia. Produce required immeasurable amounts of water and attention, and livestock needed hay to supplement drought-affected pasture. If there was a silver lining in what was an otherwise dreadful summer, it was Garcia's new business plan and infrastructure needed to build a successful future.

Garcia moved from an Ankeny acreage to his new 15-acre Woodward farm in November 2010 to allow more room for his horses to graze. Then in 2011, his son Nate worked with him to help transition the farm to organic certification.

The Garcias called on the USDA for assistance to protect their natural resources through the organic transition process. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to



Christopher Garcia of Woodward persevered a nasty summer to establish a business plan for a successful, sustainable organic farming operation.

farmers through the Organic Initiative to implement conservation practices that protect natural resources on working farms.

Brad Harrison, the district conservationist for NRCS in Dallas County, says the Garcias did their homework before visiting his office in Adel. "Nate found information about our conservation programs online," said Harrison. "I was impressed with what they knew and what to ask for. It made my job easier."

Grazing System

Later that spring Harrison helped the Garcias develop a conservation plan for their farm. Right away in 2011 they addressed the farm's livestock grazing component. It required 1,500 feet of high tensil and barbed wire fence, a 150-foot water pipeline and a watering facility. Currently, Garcia has only a handful of horses and cows, but there is now room to expand.



Garcia with one of his horses on his Woodward farm.

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"This is a planned grazing system, so it is making his new system more efficient and utilizes his grass better," said Harrison. "We addressed several issues, including an inadequate quantity of feed, forage and stock water. It also improves the health and productivity of his pasture long-term."

In 2013, a new pasture and hay planting is planned to provide livestock a better mix of forage to graze.

Produce

As the Garcia's first growing season drew near in early 2012, Nate left to work on the Presidential campaign. "Nate went up to North Dakota to work on the campaign," said Christopher Garcia. Garcia's grandson Cole Giudicessi came to the rescue, helping with much of the manual labor.

The 2012 growing season proved to be a major challenge, due to the heat and drought combination. They planted tomatoes, basil, zucchini, squash, and even watermelons, but the heat and dry weather created difficult working conditions. "There were only a few hours in a day we could work because of the unbearable heat," said Garcia. "Plus, we used about 120,000 gallons of commercial water the first three months and that was costly."

They decided it was more cost-effective to haul water from the city of Woodward and implement a gravity-fed drip irrigation system. Giudicessi masterminded the irrigation system, and it was successful. "We are fortunate to have a pretty decent watering system now," he said. "This summer was a learning process and a lot of experimenting for us."

Out of the tough summer, the family duo still grew enough organic crops to supply to their family friends at Mezzodi's Italian Restaurant in Des Moines. Mezzodi's General Manager Sam Campero said he was excited to offer organic menu items. "We offered a shrimp fettuccini pasta where we incorporated the organic cherry tomatoes and fresh basil we purchased from Chris," said Campero. "It was a big hit!"

"We look forward to continuing to work with Chris and to serve more, fresh organic menu items in the future," he said.



Christopher Garcia (left) and his grandson Cole Giudicessi examine their basil plants in July 2012. Giudicessi installed a drip irrigation system in 2012 for an affordable way to water the plants.

In 2013, Garcia's new seasonal high tunnel for crops will be completed which will allow him to extend the growing season about a month in the spring and fall. High tunnels are also designed to provide protection from outside factors like wind and insects. High tunnels improve the profitability of crops and maximize farm productivity.

A typical high tunnel will consist of a metal structure covered with a layer of plastic. Unlike greenhouses, the tunnels require less building materials and little or no electricity for heating. In 2012, Iowa NRCS offered eligible program participants \$5,833 in financial assistance to build a high tunnel.

Though it was a difficult summer for Garcia, a couple good things came out of it. "We learned a lot about our farm and now we have a plan in place, and I feel good about that," he said. "The best part about last summer was getting the chance to work with my grandson every day. He is very talented, and I love his entrepreneurial spirit."

For more information about USDA conservation programs, visit your local USDA Service Center or go online to www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov.